

14 From conservative Islam to the 'Theology of acculturation'

The social and religious trajectory of a French imam

Cédric Baylocq

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Abstract

This chapter sheds light on a well-regarded French imam of Moroccan origins and his growing leadership in society, not only at the local but also at the national level. It locates Tareq Oubrou's unique trajectory and discourse within the field of contemporary Muslim leadership, and examines his key contributions to the institutionalization of Islam in France – if not his founding role in the birth of 'French Islam'. The chapter outlines Oubrou's progressive shift from a conservative understanding of Islam in his early twenties to playing a leading role in the theological 'acculturation' and 'secularization' of Islam in France, a process he considers necessary and even urgent in light of the growing tensions in French society.

Keywords: Islam in France, theology of acculturation, Tareq Oubrou, sharia of minorities, secularization

1 Introduction

On 25 February 2015, one-and-a-half months after the 7 and 9 January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris led by three French Muslim young adults, the French Minister of Internal Affairs, Bernard Cazeneuve, chose to visit the mosques of Bordeaux and Cenon in South-Western France to publicly announce the creation of a 'National Dialogue Commission with French Islam' (*Instance nationale de dialogue avec l'islam de France*). This commission gathered for the first time on 15 June 2015, and aims to supplement the work of the

existing *Conseil français du culte musulman* (CFCM), a representative body of the main Islamic federations in France, created in 2003, by dialoguing more broadly with French Muslims in order to tackle pressing issues such as imam training, countering islamophobia and radicalism, searching for solutions to the lack of mosques in certain parts of the country, or facilitating the organization of religious feasts. This was a new turn for France. By making such an important announcement in those particular mosques, the French Minister of Internal Affairs might have been suggesting that the local clergy there are good examples of Republic-compliant imams.

A renowned imam leads the first mosque, which was visited by Minister Bernard Cazeneuve in Bordeaux. For almost a quarter century, Tareq Oubrou has been acting as El Huda Mosque's main imam and rector. Its representatives commonly refer to it as the 'Mosque of Bordeaux' to foster its local rooting and facilitate its symbolic appropriation by the non-Muslim neighbourhood. This mosque was established in 1982 in a former wood factory in Bordeaux. Born in 1959 in Taroudant, Morocco, Oubrou has been recognized as a local and national figure – if not role model – in the French imamate. Oubrou progressively shifted from holding a conservative, if not rejectionist, understanding of Islam in his early twenties to playing a leading role in the theological 'acculturation' and even assumed 'secularization' of Islam in France – a process he has deemed necessary and even urgent in light of growing tensions and conflicts. The second mosque visited by the Minister is located in Cenon, a popular neighbourhood facing the wealthy city of Bordeaux on the other side of the Garonne River where a significant number of North African migrants settled during the 1970s and 1980s. Like the El Huda Mosque, it is owned and run by the *Fédération musulmane de la Gironde* (FMG), the former *Association des musulmans de la Gironde* (AMG), which changed its name in 2010 as a result of a clash between the followers of Oubrou and his local opponents. The French-Mauritanian cleric Mahmoud Doua, Oubrou's closest disciple, is the imam in chief at this mosque.

In this chapter, I locate imam Tareq Oubrou's unique trajectory and discourses within the field of contemporary Muslim leadership in France and examine his key contributions to the institutionalization of Islam in France, if not his founding role in the birth of 'French Islam'.

2 Biographical elements and pastoral trajectory

His father, who was the director of an elementary school, and his mother, who taught French in the same school, brought up Tareq Oubrou in Taroudant.

As a result, 'books have always been part of [his] environment' (interview with Oubrou, Bordeaux, March 2003). While Taroudant is known for training Maliki clerics, nothing in Oubrou's early life predestined his later embrace of a clerical vocation. His father was 'not deeply religious' (*ibid.*), and his mother wanted him to become a physician, certainly not an imam. In fact, they would even consider his current profession to be a social disgrace, as his migration to France was initially in the pursuit of higher education.

Oubrou left Morocco at the age of nineteen and settled in Bordeaux in the South of France, where he studied biology and medicine. It was in Bordeaux that Tareq Oubrou experienced what he called 'the encounter with God, a mystical experience' (interview, Bordeaux, March 2003), which would radically transform his life and change his trajectory. At that time (in the early 1980s), Islamic organizations were not yet well established or were about to emerge in France. Local Muslim communities mostly consisted of North- and West-African migrant workers, some French Muslims born in France, and students who mostly came from North Africa (such as Oubrou), Lebanon, and Syria. At that time, Muslims living in France lacked clerics who could lead the prayers and provide basic teachings about Islam. It is in this context that Oubrou began his journey in the imamate, moving from Bordeaux (1980-1982) to Pau (1983-1986), Nantes (1986-1987), and Limoges (1987-1992), and eventually returning to Bordeaux to take up a position as the resident imam at El Huda Mosque. Beginning as the imam in charge of leading the prayers, he became an *imām al-atfāl* ('imam for kids'), and then served as the *imām khaṭīb* ('sermon imam'). Eventually he became the main figure of the local Muslim community, and started to provide legal consultations (Baylocq, 2008), courses, and conferences on traditional disciplines such as the general approach to the Quran (rather than *tafsīr*), elements of *fiqh*, and *kalām* ('Islamic theology'), in addition to his continued role in preaching and leading prayers. Furthermore, he increased the realms of own expertise to encompass Islam and secularism, the sharia of minorities, and the theology of acculturation/secularization. Following Frégosi's typology (2004), Oubrou combined at least three functions that are usually divided among distinct clerics: imam, jurist, and lecturer.

Oubrou's work has received little attention in the academic community (Bowen, 2004; Caeiro, 2006; more broadly, Hashas, 2014; Sèze, 2013). While these studies shed much-needed light on his intellectual project, it is important to note that the practical and theological aspects of Oubrou's activity are inseparably intertwined, as we will see below.

From the beginning of the 2000s, Oubrou became involved in the broader local landscape: participating in interfaith dialogs, organizing conferences

outside the mosque, engaging in debates with academics, and participating in institutional meetings, most notably with Alain Juppé, the mayor of Bordeaux since 1995 who later became a Minister. Since late 2009, Oubrou regularly gives interviews to newspapers and frequently participates in media programmes, particularly on the radio station *France Culture* and a weekly programme on Islam that is broadcast by the state-funded television channel *France2*. He has become increasingly regarded as the articulate, outspoken, and moderate Muslim interlocutor that non-Muslim audiences were looking for.

Apart from these public activities, most of his time remains dedicated to his function as the imam of the Bordeaux mosque. There, he has implemented bilingual sermons in French and Arabic and was the first in France to designate a room for Muslim women on the same floor as men (at the back of the ground floor, their space being differentiated by a small step of about 30 centimetres). Yet, his lay involvement beyond the strict borders of the Muslim community has brought scathing criticism from his local opponents. He has been particularly accused of being more oriented 'toward the outside' than towards the needs of his Muslim fellows, as well as being 'compromised' by his activities in the political field. These allegations and tensions eventually led to clashes with threats and rushes in 2010 inside the *Association des musulmans de la Gironde* (AMG) – an organization related to the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF), which is usually considered an avatar of the Muslim Brotherhood. Jawad Rhaouti, a teacher of mathematics and former president of AMG, wanted to wrest control of this local institution from Oubrou and his followers, whom he accused of not doing enough for the community and for abusing the money collected as zakat. Oubrou and his coalition took the case to court and won the right to continue leading the organization.

But Oubrou's personal and social trajectory has not always been a success story. Until his return to Bordeaux ten years after beginning his clerical career there, he endured social hardship: 'I was a homeless imam without even realizing it', as it was at that time 'considered normal for an imam to work for free' and an honour to hold that position (Oubrou, 2009, p. 27). The poor socio-economic conditions of Muslim communities in France at the time should not be overlooked, a situation exacerbated by the fact that French law forbids the public funding of religions (the 1905 law on 'the separation between the Churches and the State'). Oubrou would regularly sleep in mosques or, at best, in a flat provided to him by one of his coreligionists. A number of French Muslim activists from the 1980s and 1990s acknowledge the challenges he faced and the poor social conditions he experienced during

this period. While some of these activists did not share his liberal opinions, they kept his past experiences in mind and did not reject him, unlike the new generation of the French Muslim Brotherhood and, more notably, the Salafis. Oubrou therefore gained his religious legitimacy through *acting* directly in the French Muslim field before he started *thinking* and making theological propositions.

Yet a symbolic element could also explain Oubrou's current place in the French Muslim field. David Henning Fluharty has established the conditions that lead to the advent of a charismatic religious leader: 'The charismatic leader finds the living conditions of certain people objectionable and seeks modification of their conditions' (1990, p. 63). Fluharty then draws on the figure of the *Zaddik* ('exemplary men of good acts' in the Hebraic tradition) as a paradigm for understanding what constitutes religious charisma:

In general terms, prior to becoming recognized by many people, the potential charismatic leader must become aware of the earthly conditions, the good and the bad, and commit himself to improve – for his people or tribe – those conditions he finds objectionable. (Fluharty, 1990, p. 63)

While Oubrou eventually came to be widely recognized at the state-institutional level for his reformist approach towards Islam in a secular context, his legitimacy as an engaged imam at the grass-roots level preceded this recognition. This partly explains why he allows himself to be provocative about sensitive issues within the Muslim community such as the veil or minarets. Accordingly, one of the reasons for Oubrou's founding of the *Association des Imams de France* (The Association of imams in France) in the 1990s was to tackle the social issues faced by imams in France and to foster collective discussions on imam training. Yet, he deliberately kept this association quiet to avoid competition with the Chateau Chinon Institute for Human Sciences – an imam-training institute associated with the *Union des organisations islamiques de France*, believed to be the French branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – and with *Dar al-Fatwa* (Interview, November 14th) the religious theological body from the same organization – even though these two institutions had failed to address the issue of the socio-economic status of imams in France or to establish themselves as the uncontested religious authorities in the country.

Oubrou positions himself not only on theological matters but also at the crossroad of different areas of knowledge. For instance, in a conference organized in 2014 he characterized postmodernity as follows: the advent of

‘technics’, ‘emotions’, and ‘tensions’.¹ Ongoing secularization has generated a religious backlash, and modern imams must according to him, carefully handle this process by issuing relevant religious fatwas that will not exacerbate social, religious, and intercultural tensions. In Oubrou’s view, one cannot frame sermons and disseminate religious opinions *in abstracto* or by referring to the ninth- and tenth-century ‘episteme’ (that is, the classical founding period of the traditional Islamic schools of law), as he likes to phrase it in a Foucauldian fashion. One should rather use the term of what he calls ‘proximal theology’. He therefore advocates the advent of Islamic scholars who are both *‘ālimūn bi-l-‘aṣr wa ‘ālimūn bi-l-sharī‘a* (scholars of contemporary times and of Islamic law), by which he means that European imams of the twenty-first century should be knowledgeable in both the profane and religious sciences and should apply their profane knowledge to the interpretation of their religious traditions. While Mohammad Arkoun (1984) dreamed about a secular and deconstructionist approach – which would hardly be followed by a large section of observant Muslims – Oubrou wishes to accomplish this goal from the inside, that is from the inner circle of observant Muslims and through the use of traditional disciplines such as *fiqh*.

3 Classical Ikhwanis discourse from the 1980s

Oubrou did not always hold reformist and ‘liberal’ views, however. In an old video first released by a local member of the Muslim Brotherhood and circulated in 2007 by a far-right website through the Google Video online platform, we can see and hear Oubrou debiting the all-encompassing ‘conspirationist’ and hegemonic themes consistent with classical radical Islamist thought of the 1970s–1980s.² Examples of his comments in this video are the following: Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who abolished the last Islamic Caliphate, is ‘in reality a Jew disguised as a Muslim’; anti-Western statements and moral panic discourse about ‘the decadency of moral values in Western

1 ‘L’Islam est-il sécularisable? Une approche à travers le concept de *furūqyyia*’, 9 October 2014, ‘The people, the State and Politics in the Mediterranean. Between Islam and Secularization?’ colloquium organized by the Center Jacques Berque for the Study of Human and Social Sciences (CNRS USR 3136), the Institut Français in Morocco, and Mundiapolis University, under the supervision of the author.

2 Available at: https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x1y9qq_hasan-al-banna-conference-en-franca_news (the other links are indicated at the bottom of this link). The video is presented as having been recorded at the beginning of the 1990s, but it is possible that it was recorded in the late 1980s, when Oubrou was about 27 years old.

societies'; and assertions that the truth comes only from Islam and that what comes from the outside is 'misguiding'. He further states that 'the umma was in an illegal situation, I would even say in a sinful situation as the caliphate is an obligation'. He dwells upon an apology of the founding father of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, whom Oubrou used to consider a 'saint' and even to have abilities similar to those of the prophet Muhammad in shaping human behaviours. He then develops the usual Islamist holistic conception of Islam as regulating every aspect of life, which is a leitmotiv in Islamist organizations and political parties (see, notably, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica, 1981-1982; and Tibi, 2014, pp. 259-260).

Oubrou quite visibly no longer holds these views. When questioned about this early period, he stated that this *logiciel islamiste* ('islamist hardware') had wasted his time, and that he now urges young French Muslims to refrain from similar wasted efforts.

4 Oubrou's key theological concepts

At the beginning of the new century when Oubrou first started to introduce reformist views on Islam into the public debate, he was initially reluctant to use the term 'adaptation', or even 'reformation', instead choosing to talk about 'revisiting' the tradition. However, he progressively took up those terms (adaptation and reformation) to define his work and, since 2010, has even bypassed them by forging a notion of the 'theology of acculturation' and stressing the need for a 'secularization of Islam' in the contemporary French and European contexts. Later, he even used the term 'endogenous' to refer to the much-needed separation between politics and/or traditional Arabic culture on one hand, and Islam as a faith and spirituality on the other hand (lecture, Casablanca, 2014). His book on this matter is still pending; he has spoken of its publication but it is not yet released. In addition to my own enquiry (Baylocq, 2008), the originality of Oubrou's theological and canonical reflections have been noted by several scholars (Bowen, 2004; Caeiro, 2006; Hashas, 2014). The following sections discuss some of the core theological principles through which he approaches Islamic sources.

4.1 General hermeneutical approach towards the Quran

To better understand Oubrou's approach towards traditional Islamic sources in contemporary contexts, it is crucial to stress his attempt to distinguish the content of revelation that is dedicated to the first receptors of the message

– that is, the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century – from the Quranic content that is dedicated to humanity as a whole. This distinction is fundamental: here lies the major divide between Oubrou and traditionalist trends such as classical Ikhwanis or Salafis, who decline to apply a hierarchical reading of the verses of the Quran. Oubrou aims at qualitatively distinguishing two levels of Quranic discourses from those delivered by God to humanity through its first Arab recipients. Accordingly, his return to foundational principles is a literalist one. In this regard, Oubrou is not thoroughly innovative, as classical traditionalists have already forged the notion of *asbāb al-nuzūl* ('the circumstances of revelation') to determine the specific historical and political circumstances under which each verse was revealed. But Oubrou has articulated a more extensive concept than *asbāb al-nuzūl*; instead, he speaks of 'the Quranic moment'. This particular 'moment' requires reflecting upon the whole anthropological, cultural, socio-economic, and political living conditions of the Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula at that time. Oubrou's key idea is that God not only delivered a universal message, but also took into consideration the cultural reality of the time of the revelation. This is a recurrent view that Oubrou often expresses during sermons, courses of Islamic theology, and public talks, notably through the sentence: 'The fact that God took into account the context of the revelation does not mean he canonized it' (interview, Bordeaux, August 2007). Here lies a subtle indication of the 'divine intention', which Oubrou uses to offer a paradigm for organizing, classifying, and giving a hierarchical structure to the vast normative material provided by the Quran. Without this paradigm, Oubrou asserts, the divine words become unintelligible and lead a lot of young Muslims to misguided behaviours in the contemporary world.

To put it differently, to be understood and obeyed by the first recipients of his divine message, God had to take into account the anthropological background of Bedouin society (Oubrou, 2006b, pp. 66-70).³ Oubrou considers this a token of God's great wisdom, as it would ease the reception of his message. If the revelation intended to transform the seventh-century Arab pagan context and to challenge Judaism and Christianity (while accepting them as part of its own genesis), it did not aim at radically revolutionizing this context, in Oubrou's views. God would not have intended to implement a brutal rupture through his revelation and take the risk of his prophet being definitively misunderstood, as other prophets had been before him. In this

3 See our English translation of 'A brief historical overview of the birth of Islamic theology, its adaptation and formalization', translated from Oubrou, 2006b, and published as an annex of an interview with the imam at <http://iqbal.hypotheses.org/842> (March 2013).

regard, relying on Ibn Taymiyyah, Oubrou says that God and his prophet applied a universal paradigm of ease of religion for people, based on the verse: 'Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship' (Quran 2:185). In Oubrou's views, this indicates 'the divine pedagogy', a closely related concept that he often stresses. Muslim individuals are urged to be inspired by this gradual perspective in relation to their faith. God is the omniscient and omnipotent and could have imposed everything at once if he wanted to, and yet he did not. For Oubrou, this attitude is exemplified by the fact that God did not abolish slavery, even though he is 'the most merciful'. Abolishing slavery would have imperilled the whole economic system of the Arabs from the Peninsula at the time. But he did open up a possibility for enslaved people to be freed. Building on key principles of late Mu'tazili thought, Oubrou stresses that God allowed human beings to make use of their autonomy of judgment and reason. This also helps in accounting for what can appear to contemporary believers as an abuse (slavery) that is tolerated by the Quran. This hermeneutical paradigm, i.e., 'The fact that God took into account the context of the revelation does not mean he canonized it', predicated upon the contextualization of the sacred words of God (whether in their original context or in the contemporary context), constitutes a starting point for Oubrou's thought, rather than an all-encompassing and static theology. Consequently, Oubrou asserts that 'Islam must be disentangled (*désenveloppé*) from the Arab culture of the Quranic moment (*la culture du moment coranique*);⁴ which has been canonized together with the core tenets of revelation – that is, the revealed universal principles that are applicable to all times. This step aims at subtly differentiating the intangible parts of the divine message from the contextual and cultural circumstances of the Arab Peninsula in the seventh century. Ultimately, this *désenveloppement* ('disentanglement') process of Islam from its ancient cultural pellicle needs to go further: the core Islamic intangible values and principles should be *réenveloppé* ('re-entangled') into the local contemporary culture in which Muslims are living (in this case, France).

In short, it is necessary to return to the sources to discriminate what has been incorporated into the discursive vehicle of Islam, its traditional construction that is closely intertwined with specific historical circumstances, to better highlight the intangible and universal aspects of the divine message. Thus, this return to the sources does not intend at all following the literal

4 This idea was first articulated at the Congress of the former *Association des Musulmans de la Gironde* (AMG), 'Espace Marx', in Bordeaux, 5 March 2003, and then reiterated during several public occasions and further developed in an interview with the author in October 2006.

behaviour of the prophet like Salafis do. This line of thought would eventually lead Oubrou to advocate an 'acculturation of Islam' into Europe in general and France in particular. Such an 'acculturation' implies that Islam would be peacefully integrated into new cultural contexts and thus more easily accepted, and would also be transmissible within new contexts as 'there is no transmission of religion without culture' (interview, Bordeaux, June 2009).

4.2 'Sharia of minorities'

Though 'sharia' has become a rather worrisome term, in Oubrou's thought it does not involve the all-encompassing meaning usually found in traditional Muslim jurists' definitions or in classical discourses of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Pakistani scholar Muhammad Khalid Masud, who is both traditionally and academically trained, framed the problem with classical hegemonic views of sharia in the following way:

Muslim jurists in the past were quite aware of the constant need to reconcile contradictions between social and legal norms. They continuously adjusted laws to bring them in line with the customs and norms of the people. The normative basis of the institutions and concepts such as family, property, rights, responsibility, criminality, civil obedience, social order, religiosity, international relations, war, peace, and citizenship have changed significantly over the last two centuries. The weakness of the traditional construction of the sharia in meeting social expectations stresses the need for a fresh quest for the normative basis. Consequently, Muslim views on the position of sharia in Muslim polity have become increasingly polarized between secularist and traditionalist viewpoints. (Masud, 2001, pp. 4-5)

In other words, Muslim thinkers should not replicate classical representations of sharia in a non-Muslim, secular country. Sharia cannot substitute for French secular positive law since, as Oubrou argues, 'The judgment of the judge is the only broadsword imposed upon people' (AMG Congress, Bordeaux, March 2003). Oubrou considers this situation as an opportunity and intellectual challenge, rather than a constraint. A key notion he has been keen on propounding is *sharia de minorité* ('sharia of minority'). In his own words, Oubrou aims

to draw the canonical basis for a canonico-legal Islam, that is to say conform to a sharia thought and elaborate it in the global French juridical and constitutional context. The goal is to realize a double conformity to sharia's canon and to the law of the Republic, showing there is neither

antimony nor fracture between Islam and its secular context. This vision of sharia is dominated by an 'ethic of conciliation', oriented by the concern of Islam as a religion and spirituality totally integrated into the French reality. (Oubrou, 2006b, p. 420)

The term 'sharia of minority' refers to a revised version of Islamic normativity that is available for the use of a minority and operates at the individual level. A Muslim minority must refrain from challenging the current (secular) laws of the society it lives in.

Oubrou stresses that his thought is influenced by the reality of French Muslims and his day-to-day activity as an imam, rather than the reverse. This is what he refers to as a *théologie proximale* ('proximal theology') as mentioned earlier, a theology as close as possible to the people and their context. The outcomes of his canonical and theological reflections, themselves based on his observations and practices as an imam, are then worked back into his pastoral activity. For instance, he has created four types of legal responses (fatwas) to concrete problems and questions raised by French Muslims during his legal consultations: (1) 'the positive fatwa by articulation', the most simple type of fatwa, which is directly related to a formal, unambiguous, and available legal Islamic content and therefore generating an 'automatic enunciation', a quite direct answer; (2) the 'positive common fatwa', which appraises the general level of practice of the worshiper so that the fatwa will not destabilize his social life; (3) 'the positive situational or individualized fatwa', which is a biodegradable fatwa that should only be used in that one particular situation by the individual who requested it; and (4) 'the canonical mutism' or 'silence'. Response (4) is the most original: Oubrou theorizes the necessity for a mufti to sometimes keep silent to avoid disrupting the daily life of a fellow Muslim with non-adapted and unnecessary norms (see Oubrou, 2004, pp. 205-230, for this typology and Baylocq, 2008). Through this innovative attitude, he deliberately aims at tackling the 'normative cancer' (interview, Bordeaux, November 2006) that is often propagated within his community; this would eventually lead to the 'contraction of the domain of sharia' (to echo Abdolkarim Soroush's concept).

Applying Andrew March's model of 'Theocrats living under secular law', Oubrou's work would more or less fall under the 'Thicker Social Contract Model, or Overlapping Consensus' category, defined as 'a doctrine of affirming the substantive justness or legitimacy of a politico-legal system not based on one's own theocratic doctrine, but without abandoning, dissolving or moving beyond the terms of that theocratic doctrine' (March, 2011, p. 32) – although probably in a more secular-friendly fashion.

4.3 Toward a theology of acculturation/secularization

The notion of a 'sharia of minority' has attracted the attention of a number of scholars (Bowen, 2004; Caeiro, 2006; Hashas, 2014), as it is the first serious European attempt to provide a solid theoretical foundation for the practices of and discourses on Islam in European secular contexts. Sheikh Fayçal Mawlawi, with whom Oubrou was acquainted in the mid-1980s (when the Lebanese scholar was the guide of the *Union des organisations islamiques de France*), was more circumspect in using the classical tool of the *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*. Yet Mawlawi was the first to pave the way for an adaptation of Islamic normativity in line with the new European landscape at the theological and canonical levels; Oubrou also stresses the need to adapt discourses and practices.

In Oubrou's view, the culture and political philosophy of the majoritarian 'host' society must be taken into account by Muslim jurists and second-generation, French-born Muslims, who are likely to adopt and adapt a version of Islam forged in their parent's homelands or in Saudi Arabia (through the influence of cassette sermons; the Internet, particularly sermons on YouTube; Wahhabi books translated into French; Arab satellite television channels; and the like). In this regard, a footnote in his 2006b book arouses some interest. This quote is significant as it reveals Oubrou's subversive reading of Islamic history (here, of the Al-Andalus period) *vis-à-vis* Muslim apologists and even the majority of his community. By contrast, we can discern the kind of acculturation processes he advocates for Muslims living in Europe:

Islam did not invariably succeed in integrating into other cultures. Despite eight centuries in Spain, Muslims did not integrate themselves definitively. They stayed culturally selfish, anthropologically Arab-Berbers, linguistically Arabs, and ethnically community-based. The so-called model of Andalusian Islam, often depicted as a historical success, should not be considered as such. It is more to be considered a failure to be meditated upon. This presence, we admit, contributed to the progress of the West. It even indirectly contributed to the advent of the Enlightenment, thanks to its intellectual and scientific contribution, but at the same time *it participated in energizing a hostile Christianity* – which was not originally so – that expelled it from Europe as a result. On the contrary, Islam succeeded in settling definitely in other civilizations and linguistic areas where it was acculturated and consequently still exists nowadays... Of course, Christian fanaticism played an important role in this rejection of Islam in Spain because, after the Reconquista, Christians were not as tolerant as the

Muslims had been when they conquered Spain. But we did not mention this aspect in our critique because it is not directly related to our issue, dealing only *with intrinsic factors of adaptation*. (Oubrou, 2006b, p. 70, my italics)

As a consequence of this failure, Islam as a civilization collapsed while Islam as a religion survived. It has to borrow from the civilization or local culture in which Muslims are settled (in this case, Europe), if they wish to deep-root their religious belonging and make it accepted (rather than only 'tolerated'). Moreover, this process represents for Oubrou the only chance for Islam to be transmitted, disseminated, and reproduced.

Oubrou outlines one final step after the reconciliation of cultural and religious belongings: Muslims should seize the opportunity of living as a minority in a secular state to modify their episteme and adjust their approach to their religion. He remains aware of the fact that the current historical phases experienced by the Arab world (before the 2011 Arab Spring, at least) do not facilitate this project of reappraisal. Thus, the next and final phase of his theological project is to initiate a process of secularization that will ultimately end in merging the secular and the religious. Yet this process must be conducted within Islamic categories to be valid and fully accepted. Oubrou certainly anticipates that a 'savage secularization' would lead to a severe backlash. He is thus very careful in this project:

What I mean by 'intrinsic theological secularization' is a secularization that does not leave Islam. It remains fully intra-Islamic, in the sense of a relation of discernment and distinction between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, whose repertoires could join as well as depart from one another. It seems necessary in particular to distinguish the permanent matters from the temporary in the Quran and the Sunna. In this perspective, secularization is the result of interactions between different dimensions of Islam – notably between the theological and canonical, the metaphysical dogmatic and the practical sharia – in historical and anthropological conditions, which determine its shape and scope. Thus, it allows a perpetual renewal of Islam by a conscious, perspicuous, and humble interpenetration able to sort immutable divine principles from circumscribed thought. (Oubrou, 2006b, p. 102)

Here are the lineaments of an adaptation, a reformation of the traditional concept of sharia in the light of secularization, but still relying on the main Islamic ethical views and the *maqāsid al-sharīʿa* perspective, using fiqh rather than a completely secular approach such as those developed by modernist

intellectuals like Malek Chebel, Abdenour Bidar, or Abdelmajid Charfi. The notion of 'sharia of minority' appears to be the first step toward the notion of a 'theology of acculturation, which goes much further. The latter notion, as we have just seen above has the ambition to be the blueprint for a harmonious integration of Islam in the abode of secularism (i.e. France). It could thus be the occasion for a new case study once the present imam and theologian would have developed this notion in the future whether in publications, conferences, courses or sermons. In an anthropological perspective, the reception of this work among Muslim groups also promises to be an interesting point to work on⁵

5 Conclusion: Pursuing liberal reform in a time of tensions and violence

To understand Oubrou's positions on sensitive issues that have arisen in the French public debate, such as the veil or minarets, one must locate them in his broader theological project. Regarding the veil, he claims that a hierarchization of norms and practices is required in Islam. The veil, he first recalls, has not to be confused with *al-'ibādāt* ('the ritual norms'), as it instead pertains to the domain of *al-akhlāq* ('the moral norms'). He is therefore highly critical of his coreligionists erecting this practice as a symbol, even as 'a flag of Islam' (interview, Bordeaux, May 2009). This position has caused him trouble with the French Muslim Brotherhood, up to the point that he was about to be expelled from the UOIF – particularly after an interview released in the newspaper *Le Monde* on 16 October 2009, in which he declared: 'If I were to be provocative, I would tell women: Put your veil in your pocket! Today I would rather say it is an implicit recommendation, which corresponds to an ethical modesty from the Quranic moment. Yet, women who do not wear a hijab do not commit a sin.' Less than a year after this statement, his disciple Mahmoud Doua, the imam of Cenon, organized a meeting at the Mosque of Bordeaux (14 June 2010) for Oubrou to theologically address the problem of the hijab. He developed his views on the hijab during a three-hour conference, facing some fifty local Muslims, more than half of whom were women. The transcript of this lecture runs to eight pages.

5 He has not written extensively on that particular question since, but has developed the idea on different occasions: Oubrou Tareq, 'La sécularisation de l'Islam à travers la charia de minorité', Conference at the International Summer School of Anthropology (5th edition), Irissary (French Basque Country), July 2010 (dir. Pierre Bidart and Abel Kouvouama), and 'L'Islam est-il sécularisable? Une approche à travers le concept de *furuqiyā*', October 2014, op.cit.

As for minarets, the question is even easier to solve, as there is 'no canonical obligation (for a mosque) to display a minaret' (interview, March 2009). As a result, the new mosque project in Bordeaux, although bigger and more accessible through providing parking facilities, does not display a minaret. Coherent with his conception of acculturation and integration, he oriented the architect of the future mosque toward a locally embedded and modern style of architecture, stressing at the same time the fact that the building must be identifiable as a mosque from the outside, as the processes of integration and acceptance must be reciprocal, in his view.

This positioning on matters relating to the question of Islamic visibility – which Oubrou wishes to be 'discrete' (*Le Monde*, October 2013) – in a secular public sphere must be read in relation to his ambition of progressively facilitating a peaceful and harmonious integration of Islam in France at a time characterized by conflicts (which Hashas examines as a 'Geotheology', 2014). In addition to this reformist project, he is committed to forming a theological and canonical perspective – in which one might also hypothesize that there is some influence from his Sufi orientation, an aspect that would require a separate inquiry.

In the aftermath of the Paris attacks in January 2015, the UOIF (with which he is affiliated) announced the creation of a Muslim Theological Council of France (*Conseil théologique musulman de France*, CTMF). It will be interesting to observe whether this structure will operate as a 'driving belt' of Oubrou's current line of thought, or if the conservative trend in UOIF will have the upper hand. The series of attacks in downtown Paris on Friday, 13 November 2015 illustrated the ever more urgent need for the propagation of a critical approach and liberal reforms among Muslim youth – a paradigm that would be likely to counter pervasive radical approaches and theologically accompany the current processes of secularization and acculturation overall.

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About the author

Cédric Baylocq holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Bordeaux. He is a research associate at the LAM, Sciences Po Bordeaux and the CISMOC, University of Louvain. He co-authored *Profession imâm. Entretiens avec Tareq Oubrou* (with Michaël Privot and Albin Michel, 2009, augmented ed. 2015) and has written a dozen articles on Islam in France and Morocco in peer-reviewed journals or edited volumes. He is currently in charge of a national fund dedicated to supporting social science research on Islam in France.

